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# McGregor Sand Artist

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## McGregor Sand Artist

In a wooded ravine among the hills overlooking the Mississippi River, one mile south of McGregor, a stratum of St. Peter sandstone is exposed. It is almost pure silica, but small amounts of iron oxide have been deposited between the grains of sand by the water percolating down from the overlying Trenton limestone. This infiltration has produced more than forty delicate shades of color in bands and patches which give the face of the rock a beautiful variegated appearance. To thousands of visitors the place has long been known as Pictured Rocks.

It was from this sandstone, wherein may be found most of the chromatic color range from pale shell pink through deep dark red, as well as green, blue, terra cotta, brown, and the achromatic colors from white to black through the intermediate grays, that Andrew Clemens, the sand artist of McGregor, obtained the material for the exquisite miniatures he designed in glass bottles.



A talented artist without paints and brushes, he lacked, in addition, formal training in art. Handicapped at an early age with complete loss of hearing due to illness, Andrew Clemens's life is a story of fortitude and courage. At the age of twenty, he determined, despite his handicap, to forge a career of usefulness and purpose. With nothing but a set of tools he had fashioned from hickory, plus a quantity of colored sand from Pictured Rocks, he set to work. Most amazing of all is the fact that the majority of the bottles he used for his miniature work were the quaint, clear, round-top kind in favor during the mid-Victorian era. This meant that the pictures and designs he wrought with the minute colored sand particles inserted with his simple tools through the mouth of the bottle were "painted" upside down!

Margaretha Wolf, aged twenty-three, born in Hesse Darmstadt (Germany), and Johann Clemens, aged twenty-seven, born in Prussia, were among the passengers on a sailing vessel that embarked for America in 1851. Due to calm seas, it was a long journey, taking almost three months to complete. Romance relieved the tedium on shipboard, however, and so the courtship of Margaretha and Johann culminated in their marriage at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on October 18, 1852. Trained as a locksmith in Germany, Johann, who



soon began to spell his name John, encountered difficulty in finding employment at his trade. Fantastic stories of the wealth and opportunities in America for those with the courage to seek them had been rife back in Germany. Good fortune, however, eluded John Clemens in Milwaukee, for no one seemed to need or want a locksmith. For a while he worked with a wagon-maker, receiving but ten dollars to iron a wagon. Hard times were made more difficult by the arrival of a son who was named John for his father.

Meanwhile, the discovery of gold in California and the opening of farm lands west of the Mississippi stimulated migration westward. Eager for a better opportunity in his own field, John Clemens followed the current trend and moved his family to Dubuque in 1852. There, in partnership with his brother, Joseph, he opened a wagon shop. Life proved pleasant and prosperous for the Clemens family in Dubuque. Two more sons arrived to grace the family circle. August was born on June 19, 1854, and two and a half years later, on January 29, 1857, a third son, Andrew, was born. Meanwhile, on the fourth of August, 1856, John Clemens became a citizen, on his solemn oath to support the Constitution of the United States and "absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to every foreign Prince,



Power, Potentate, State, and Sovereignty whatever, and particularly to the King of Prussia of whom he was before a subject."

Emigrants who came to the wagon shop often remained to talk with the genial wagon-maker following completion of their business and John began to hear prognostications concerning a town up-river that would some day be a great metropolis of the midwest. The town of McGregor was a focal point for the shipment of grain and hogs by steamboat and likewise for the steady influx of immigrants who there obtained wagons and provisions to continue their journey westward. Hotels were crowded to capacity, new mercantile houses both wholesale and retail, carriage factories, harness shops, saloons, and eating houses were opening every day. Quick to sense opportunity, John Clemens moved his family to McGregor in 1858, to open a wagon shop on Main Street, half way between Fourth and Fifth streets, in partnership with his brother, Joseph Clemens, and Anton Thielen of Dubuque.

That John Clemens expected to do a land-office business is evident from the advertisement he inserted in the *North Iowa Times* on October 20, 1858. "Wagons! Wagons! Clemens and Thielen recently from Dubuque have located at McGregor for the purpose of carrying on the Car-



riage and Wagon Business. We are connected with a large establishment at Dubuque and already supply a great portion of northern Iowa. Our material is of the best quality that can be procured at Chicago and other eastern markets and our customers may rely on getting good timber well made up, well seasoned, and strongly ironed. We have a stock of timber always on hand, and in case orders come too fast for the shop, we can fill them from Dubuque without delay. Ready made wagons on hand and for sale at very low prices. Farmers and Emigrants will make money by calling at our Shop and examining work and price. Shop on Main Street above the Western House."

Andrew Clemens enjoyed the life of any typical small boy in the late fifties or early sixties. His father's wagon shop attached to their home was a busy and interesting place to visit. McGregor's main thoroughfare was teaming with activity and he liked to watch the steady stream of wagons loaded with produce going down toward the public scales and the emigrant wagons carrying strange men, women, and children headed upstreet toward the west. There were aristocratic ladies and gentlemen with their fine clothes and shining carriages drawn by prancing horses. He laughed and played with his older brothers.



For the five-year-old lad, life was pleasant indeed. Then, Andrew fell ill, very ill.

"Brain fever", the attending physician diagnosed the case, gravely. Encephalitis, medical science would term it today. The physician shook his head and told the stricken parents that their boy could not survive. Desperate, and stubbornly refusing to abandon hope, John Clemens called in another physician. Many anxious hours the father and mother watched at Andrew's bedside and finally were told that their son would live but that he would be stone deaf. From that day on, Andrew lived in a world of his own, a silent world. Unable to attend school because of his affliction, he remained at home with his mother, wistful and lonely, as he watched his brothers start off with their books each morning. Due to his deafness, his speech too became impaired. Determined that Andrew should have his chance along with her other sons, Margaret Clemens set to work to instruct him herself, establishing first her own simple system of communication by lip formations, so that he might comprehend what she was trying to teach him. He was a bright lad, eager to learn, and so made some progress with his education.

When Andrew was thirteen, his parents decided to send him to the Iowa Institute for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb at Council



Bluffs. According to the records, he enrolled on November 11, 1870, and was described as "bright, active, tolerably strong and very well disposed." Andrew enjoyed his studies and work in the carpenter shop at the school for the deaf and likewise the association with other boys and girls similarly afflicted. He adapted himself readily to the new environment. Nevertheless, his summer vacations at home were even more pleasant, for his brothers were very fond of him. There was much excitement and happy expectation at the end of June when Andrew came home. His younger brother, Oscar, always found cause for good-natured complaint that "no one ever remembered his birthday because that was the date that Andrew arrived."

But vacation was not a period of idleness. With a lathe and scroll saw, Andrew applied his school training by turning out shelf brackets, rolling pins, and baseball bats. The boys played games and took excursions to the Indian mounds atop the hills. Best of all, were the trips to Pictured Rocks where Andrew collected colored sand and packed it into bottles in artistic designs.

At first, Andrew confined his work to simple forms employing diamond-shaped patterns against a background of ivory-white sand, a serpentine design repeated in the chromatic range until the



bottle was full, or, perhaps, one simple flower motif placed in a serpentine and geometric background. Gradually, his technique improved and by utilizing different shades of a color, he learned to create overtones and diminutive landscapes. People began to ask if they might buy the beautiful sand bottles he made at home during these vacation periods.

Andrew continued his studies at the State School for the Deaf for six years until a fire on February 25, 1877, destroyed the main building and the east wing, terminating all classes abruptly. Instructors at the school urged Andrew to go on to the Smithsonian Institution at Washington to train himself to be an instructor at the school when it was rebuilt. Instead, he decided to return to his "happy hunting grounds" at McGregor where he planned to continue his miniature work with the colored sands. He was then twenty years old.

One day a young deaf mute peddling shoelaces and pencils stopped at the Clemens home. Meeting Andrew and noting his ailment, the peddler suggested that they work together selling cheap merchandise from door to door. Andrew thanked the stranger but shook his head. "Never will I try to make a living *because* of my affliction", he told his mother. "I want to *do* something with my life."



Across the street from the Clemens wagon shop Henry Goldschmidt had a grocery store. Shrewd, and aware of the artistic merits of Andrew's work, Goldschmidt suggested that Andrew might make sand bottles for his trade at a stipulated wage. Andrew consented and it was arranged that he would set up his work table in a small lean-to adjoining the grocery. There, surrounded by stores of potatoes, dried fruits, and barrels of vinegar, he began his life work in earnest.

Happy that Andrew was at home to stay, the entire Clemens family set about to help him. Mrs. Clemens made a number of cloth bags each capable of holding ten pounds of colored sand, Mr. Clemens turned out a neat little two-wheeled cart in his wagon shop, and twice each year the Clemens boys accompanied Andrew to Pictured Rocks to help him obtain material for his work. Andrew knew where the finest colors could be found, each color was placed in a separate bag, and the two-wheeled cart was loaded to capacity. In two or three days enough colored sand was obtained to last six months. The best specimens were secured in dry weather. Later, Andrew discovered that the finest white sand was available in a sand cave known as the White Springs, located at West McGregor.



Preparing the tiny grains of colored sand for his miniatures was the first step in Andrew's art. Certain that the sand was thoroughly dry, he then spread the desired color on a piece of coarse brown paper or blotting paper. This was rubbed gently with the bowl of a tablespoon and only the tiny grains adhering to the paper were used. Thus grains of uniform size were obtained.

Following many experiments, Andrew evolved the tools that proved to be most effective for his work. Exact duplicates are owned by Mrs. Albert Clemens of McGregor. A tiny tin scoop holding one-fourth of a teaspoonful of sand was fastened to a slender hickory wand nine and one-quarter inches long. It was used to insert the sand in the bottle. Andrew's "brushes", for it was with these two tools that he controlled the colors and created his miniatures and backgrounds, resembled nothing quite so much as an over-sized orange-stick, usually found on manicurists' tables, and a long crude fishhook. Both tools were nine and one-quarter inches in length, the orange-stick, or straight tool being slightly tapered at one end and having a sharp point on the opposite end, while the fishhook tool was curved at one end. Both were carved from green hickory, then tempered over a candle. Older McGregor residents who watched him as he worked



can recall how with one hand he controlled the colored sands inside the bottle with the curved tool while with the other hand, he used the straight tool to measure for perspective on the outside of the bottle. He used four packers to press the grains down tightly as he worked toward the mouth of the bottle. These, also, were of hickory and of various weights and lengths. The first packer used was twelve inches in length, the second and third relatively shorter and heavier, while the last one was the heaviest and shortest of all.

To Mr. Goldschmidt's delight, the sand bottles found great favor with his customers and ere long the demand began to exceed the supply that Andrew could produce. Two or three days and often two or three weeks were required to complete one sand bottle depending upon its size and complexity of design. George L. Bass, a steamboat agent at McGregor, bought many of Andrew's bottles to present to captains of the big steamboats. Traveling drummers took sand bottles home to wives and sweethearts as souvenirs of McGregor. Thus Andrew's fame spread throughout the country and orders began to come by mail. It was then, after two years in the employ of Mr. Goldschmidt, that Andrew decided it was time to start into business for himself. Heartily approving his decision, his father and mother



suggested that he set up his work table in front of a north window in their home. It was to this window that young and old in McGregor came to watch his deft fingers at work creating exquisite beauty from grains of sand with a few simple home-made tools.

A veritable epidemic of "sand art" went through the young fry in town like the measles, and, while unable to emulate Andrew's artistry, children could pack colored sand in attractive layers in glass bottles and sell them to transients for small sums. "I insisted that my mother and sisters buy Hosford's Baking Powder because it came in a small glass bottle with a large neck", writes Charles M. Leary of Gary, Indiana, whose boyhood days were spent in McGregor. "I made a lot of spare change in putting the sand in these bottles and selling them on the boats that often stayed two or three hours at the dock. . . . Another source of revenue was from the trains that, in those days, stopped in McGregor for twenty minutes for lunch. Our price on the bottles was one dollar, but we never got off either train or boat without selling what we had even though we had to cut our price as low as ten cents."

Andrew used no dyes, glue, or paste, according to his brother Albert. Delicacy of line, combination of colors, and rare craftsmanship were due



solely to perfection of technique and his inherent genius as an artist. Only he knew where to find some of the colors. "One day," recalls Mr. Leary, "I pointed to the blue sand in one of his trays and asked him where he got it. He read my lips and with a smile, he wrote on a piece of paper, 'Pictured Rocks'. In an effort to achieve his blue, I had resorted to mother's bluing bottle. But, my blue faded and his never, so I am certain that he was right."

Nor did Andrew work from models or sketches except when commissioned to copy a photograph or a picture. In a sense, he became a local historian. When the pontoon railway bridge was built across the Mississippi River at Prairie du Chien, he was commissioned by John Lawler, the builder, to reproduce a miniature of it in a sand bottle. For Sherburn S. Merrill, then general manager of what is now the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railway, he executed in miniature one of the first engines used on the road. This bottle was a surprise gift for Mrs. Merrill who, in later years, refused all offers to sell it and treasured it highly until her death.

For Mrs. Ella Richards, Andrew executed a miniature that was truly indicative of his rare craftsmanship. From a four-by-six-inch picture of the locomotive her husband fired, he made a



copy in sand one and one-half inches in length, and the clearly legible number on the cab, 1406, was inscribed with one grain of white sand placed above another! Unhappily, this bottle was broken many years later.

The completion of a new home often brought Andrew a commission to reproduce it in sand for the proud owner. Sand bottles were used to convey greetings on holidays and other felicitous occasions. A beautiful specimen of this type is a round-top bottle eight and three-quarters inches high owned by August Kranert of McGregor. The main motif, a sailing vessel buffeted by white-capped waves is silhouetted against fleecy white clouds in a mauve and orange sky. The greeting, "Merry Christmas" in black and yellow letters on a white background is quaintly embellished with diminutive red and white roses, white daisies, and green ferns and, as usual, the background consists of delicately executed geometric figures and serpentine bands, small conventional designs, and his customary band of leaves and flowers. A similar bottle bearing the greeting "Happy New Year", originally owned by Fred Bergman of McGregor, is now in the possession of his daughter, Miss Charlotte Bergman of Charles City.

Regarded as the finest specimen of all Andrew's work is the George Washington bottle owned by



Mrs. Elsie Clemens of Madison, Wisconsin. A round-top bottle twelve inches high and having a circumference of fourteen inches, this exquisite work of art contains sand miniatures of George Washington astride his favorite white horse, a side-wheel steamboat correct in every detail, two American Indians in ceremonial regalia standing against a tepee, and an accurate reproduction of the Great Seal of Iowa. The State motto, "Our Liberties we prize, and Our Rights we will maintain", is a marvel of precision. And this complicated project, as in all the round-top bottles, was executed upside down.

It is not known how many sand bottles Andrew made during his lifetime, but, of a certainty, they numbered in the hundreds and of these, only a few are known to exist today. Many have been broken. Due to the fragile character of the bottles and the dryness of the sand, breaking the bottle meant immediate destruction of the exquisite work inside. The late Albert Clemens of McGregor often recalled the story of a drummer who ordered two bottles to be made before he left town. Andrew worked diligently to complete them and at the appointed hour delivered them at the Flanders House. Enthusiastic over their beauty, the traveling man grasped a bottle in each hand and held them up together. But as the bot-



tles touched each other the glass shattered, and the colored sands ran out on the floor.

Talented and unique in his field, Andrew's reputation grew. Verily, he was the living exponent of the man who had "built a better mousetrap". The world began to make a "pathway to his door". Visitors from England and Germany came to watch him at work and bought sand bottles to take home. Ere long, orders commenced to arrive from Europe.

The prices he charged were incredibly low, only a fraction of the value set on his work today. A small bottle with a conventional design sold for one dollar, while a larger bottle containing a miniature of a Mississippi River steamboat, bouquets, and bearing the owner's name, was priced at six or eight dollars, according to his brother Albert. "My price for a pint bottle with a locomotive and 3 cars is \$5.00", he wrote to Albert in January, 1889.

At that time, dime museums were popular. Kohl and Middleton, proprietors of such amusement places in Chicago, Cincinnati, St. Paul, and Minneapolis, offered Andrew a job. Intrigued with the idea of working and exhibiting his sand bottles before crowds of people, Andrew accepted and, for a time, worked in the South Side Museum in Chicago, receiving twenty-five dollars a week



for his services. There, seated at his work table on an elevated platform, he would fill a small bottle in geometric designs while the barker expounded the wonder of this unique art. Having completed the bottle, Andrew would hand it to the barker who, as the grand finale of his spiel, would shatter the glass bottle with a hammer and allow the sands to run out, thus proving that this was no sleight-of-hand performance. The glamour of exhibition soon waned, however, and Andrew returned to his home in McGregor.

As the years passed, he became more and more absorbed in his work. No romantic interest appeared in his life, he had few outside activities, and gradually the confining hours spent at his work table began to take their toll, according to his brother, Frank, of Vermillion, South Dakota. His health commenced to fail.

Recognition had come, but not commensurate with his talent. "McGregor has an artist nowhere equalled in this world in his line of artistic work", wrote the editor of the *North Iowa Times*, on July 5, 1888. "He invented and became skilled in an artistic work all unaided and alone. He invented and made his own tools. He has thus brought to a surprising perfection an art of which he alone is the inventor, the master. We refer to the pictures wrought in sand from Pictured Rocks by



Andrew Clemens. Our people do not properly appreciate this art. The master don't seem to know its worth nor does he seem to realize his exalted position among the inventors of the world. Mr. Clemens lately completed what may be regarded a masterpiece. He has made many fine efforts before. This last one is a perfect picture of General Washington on horseback. The artist has surpassed the copy, he gives the coloring, shadowing, form, all complete and perfect and all done in sand. The work shows a Mississippi River steamer running at full speed, a group of Indians in camp, the flag of our country, fields, harvest scene, all perfect and wrought with natural colored sands in a glass jar. The jar is open at the bottom and the work is commenced at the top of the picture. But to appreciate this wonderful work one must see it as we have seen it. It is one of the wonders of the age and ought to have a place among the great art of the world."

Officials of the Columbian Exposition held at Chicago in 1893 invited Andrew to work and exhibit his sand art there. Gratified and pleased, he nevertheless refused the honor, feeling that his strength was unequal to the effort. It was in the following spring that townspeople were saddened when they read the black-bordered funeral notices left on doorsteps and handed to persons in the



business section — a custom of morticians in that era.

"The funeral of the late Andrew Clemens will be held at the house, Monday, May 14, 1894, at 3 p.m. Rev. C. A. Marshall will officiate."

In a half-column obituary in the *McGregor News*, the editor declared that Andrew Clemens "was a great artist, we cannot use the word 'greatest' because he stood alone in his self-invented art. He was a portrait painter without a brush or even paint. Sand was all he used, which he distributed with a small spoon, and a little stick. His work testifies for him in Europe as well as in this western Hemisphere. As an artist his place cannot be filled anymore, his special art has perished with its originator, and will be forever lost."

MARIAN CARROLL RISCHMUELLER